“Painwise”

Hermaphroditism and other solutions

In the final section of “Amor Vincit Foeminam”, Russ mentions some texts which “appear to be pro-feminist in intention”: Search the Sky (1954), “Consider Her Ways” (1956), Venus Plus X (1960) and Amazon Planet (1966) (Russ 1980: 13). I have already considered Search the Sky and “Consider Her Ways” in the previous chapter. In this chapter I examine texts, including Venus Plus X and Amazon Planet, which offer solutions or alternatives to the conflict between the sexes which do not involve the re-inscription of male rule. These solutions include, in the order I discuss them:

a version of equality where men recognise that women are not necessarily the ‘weaker’ sex - Robert Vaughan’s “The Woman From Space” (1932), Philip Wylie’s The Disappearance (1951), Robert Silverberg’s “Woman’s World” (1957) and Mack Reynold’s Amazon Planet (1966);

women establish a society without men in which the lack of men is not a problem - Joanna Russ’ “When It Changed” (1972);

a biological change is wrought so that there are no men and women but only one sex which is hermaphroditic or androgynous - Katherine Burdekin’s Proud Man (1934), Theodore Sturgeon’s Venus Plus X (1960) and Ursula Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness (1969).

In the first section, “Equality?”, I examine the first group of texts, those which posit ‘equality’ between the sexes. In these texts the economy of heterosexuality which I examined in the previous chapter is still firmly in place. Relations between the sexes are centred on sexual exchange and reproduction. In Philip Wylie’s The Disappearance (1951) and Robert Silverberg’s “Woman’s World” (1957), equality is something that can be given by men to women.
In the second section, "When It Changed: A Different Kind of Female Rule", I look closely at Joanna Russ' story, "When It Changed" (1972). This text is set on a world which has existed for years outside the heterosexual economy and is one of the first of the texts which Russ refers to as 'recent feminist utopias' in her essay of the same name (1981). The text is a direct response to many of the assumptions of the earlier battle of the sexes texts. In the final and longest section, "Hermaphroditism", I examine those texts which posit a hermaphrodite or androgynous world where sexual difference has been erased. However, these one-sexed worlds have been frequently read as allmale worlds so that the erasure of difference becomes instead the removal of women.

Equality?

I discovered a number of stories which purport to offer 'equality' between the sexes as an end to the Sex War. Not all of these texts have the same understanding of what equality between men and women means.

Richard Vaughan's "The Woman From Space" was published in the Spring 1932 edition of Wonder Stories Quarterly. Sam Moskowitz gives the following plot synopsis:

The women of an as yet undiscovered planet between Neptune and Pluto unwillingly take over when their men have virtually destroyed themselves...They develop an extraordinary science and successfully clear the asteroid belt, then move their planet into a new orbit to be closer to the sun. The earth, rendered almost uninhabitable by a star that has brushed too close to our solar system, has lost most of its women. The two worlds, one almost devoid of men, the other short of women, agree to a happy accommodation. So logical an attitude was not long to prevail in science fiction (Moskowitz 1972: 16-17).

The women of the planet Arion seized power because it was the only way to stop the men from destroying themselves and Arion. The women's motivation for seizure of power is in marked contrast to the desire for power and the subjugation or elimination of men which is the most common reason for women's usurpation of control in the texts I examined in the last chapter. The women of the planet Arion are brilliant, and their society is not stagnant like many of the matriarchal
societies of the previous chapter, nor is it modelled on ants, termites or bees.¹ The Aronian women have built a technology and civilisation far superior to that of Earth. The heroine, who is telepathic, tells the hero, “I sense from some of your thoughts that your civilization is not quite the equal of ours, is perhaps younger in evolution” (Vaughan 1932: 369).

The story’s hero, Dirk Sarrazin, is Earth’s most formidable scientist. Sarrazin first meets one of the Aronian women, Lella, when she lands on Earth as part of a team of intrepid explorers who have been sent out to explore the new galaxy. Sarrazin is dazzled by his first sighting of an Aronian:

It was apparently of a shape similar to that of an earthly being and was completely covered by a transparent, glassy envelope or suit, as supple as gauze. Through it a pair of enormous and brilliant eyes looked at him curiously. Its skin, where visible, was the loveliest, luminous blue that Dirk had ever seen, its features human in outline, yet strangely alien, as though the spirit behind them were of another essence and tempered in unknown fires.

Although standing a foot or so taller than his own goodly height, it seemed almost to float with an effect of airy grace instantly noticeable and arresting as though it was impervious to the influences of gravity. Yet a sense of power and authority dominated all its effects (Vaughan 1932: 367).

The description is of an alien, and although the alien’s sex is unknown at this stage the neuter pronoun ‘it’ is used rather than ‘he’, which Ursula Le Guin described in 1976 as the “generic pronoun” (Le Guin [1979] 1989: 145).² In 1932 it would have been automatic to assume that an alien landing on Earth in a science fiction story was male. The title of the story, “The Woman from Space” and the use of the pronoun ‘it’ seem to indicate that the alien is a woman but it does not account for the way this being is described: the alien is “transparent”, “glassy”, “supple”, “enormous”, “brilliant”, “loveliest”, “luminous”, “arresting”, “impervious”, and has an “airy grace” while at the same time “a sense of power and authority dominated all its effects”. Most of the description fits the beautiful women of countless science fiction stories but power and authority do not. Yet

¹ Unlike “The Last Man” (1929) and “The Priestess Who Rebell[ed]” (1939) which I discussed in the last chapter.
both sets of meanings, the grace and the power, remain Lella’s throughout the
text. Both sets of meanings are also linked in medieval religious discourses on
saints’ lives and mystical experience. It appears that Sarrazin has seen, not an
alien, but a saint or angel.

Dirk Sarrazin initially finds it very difficult to believe that beauty, power
and intelligence could be a woman’s:

Sarrazin’s eyes opened as the conception of a dominatingly feminine planet, infinitely
distant, yet a part of his own solar world, dawed on his mind for the first time. The
undeniable beauty of the being from space seemed more natural now that he knew it to be
feminine. Although Earth had not lacked for brilliant women in the last few centuries, he
found it hard to believe that the virile power of the mind he found dealing with his could
normally belong to a woman. That a being who could navigate alone and undaunted the
boundless realms of space could be, even though of a different race, one of what on Earth
was called the gentler sex (Vaughan 1932: 369).

The choice of “virile” here to modify the nominalisation the “power of the mind”
is telling. Lella literally has a mind like a man. This construction is a projection
of his mental process: “found it hard to believe”. The nominalisation “the power
of the mind” operates within the Cartesian mind/body split and locates manly
power explicitly in the mind. It is this virile mind-power of Lella’s which is the
Actor “dealing with” “his [mind]”. Although it is Lella’s “power of the mind” she
is written out of the passage becoming a generalised “woman” or “being”. At the
beginning of this passage “a conception...dawned on his [Sarrazin’s] mind for the
first time”. There is a fusing here of the conception of the body which is the
prerogative of the female and conception of the mind which is the prerogative of
the male.

Lella also has to reconcile herself to Dirk Sarrazin’s difference from her
planet’s ideas of ‘manly’ behaviour and tells him that:

No Aronian man would have been permitted to venture, as you have done, on a voyage
through space, and it has seemed continually strange to me to see a man daring the same
dangers as a woman and thinking with a mind equal to hers...stranger, indeed, than if
you had been some alien form of life.

According to Aronian ideas, you are more like a woman than a man; I can see that you,
with your Earthly conceptions, think I am more like a man than a woman. Our men are
of a timid, slothful disposition; they are capricious and weak in capacity for endurance or

---

3 See for instance St Teresa of Avila’s autobiography or The Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine.
action. Little is to be expected of them intellectually, though now and then they have produced a distinguished mind (Vaughan 1932: 372).

On both planets a binary shaping of sex difference prevails. Daring and the thinking of the mind are the prerogative of the valorised sex. On each planet it is the “mind” sex which is dominant while the “weak” sex dwindles. Both planets are entirely heterosexual:

In our world one sees none but women. The men are so rare as to be considered too precious to expose to the hazards of every day life. How happy your planet must be! With us, only one woman in a thousand may mate; and even then she can only keep her husband five years, unless he expressly refuses to leave her, for which he is considered unpatriotic. Only one woman in a thousand can be a mother (Vaughan 1932: 369).

The two planets begin to come together through the joining of the hero and heroine, Sarrazin and Lella:

“Would you take an Earthman for your mate Lella?” he [Dirk] asked her hoarsely. She trembled in his arms and her eyes answered before her words. Dirk caught her close and for a moment she was as feminine and clinging as any woman of Earth (Vaughan 1932: 373).

Although there is no kiss this moment is similar to those kisses in the previous chapter which were the site of the inscription of the heterosexual order. The contact with a real man robs Lella of speech and her body answers before her mind. Dirk is the Actor and Lella, his Goal. As a result she carries the attributes of a proper Earth woman, femininity and clinginess. However, in the question Dirk asks, it is Lella who is the Actor taking the Earthman, her Goal, as her mate. Though this is also the grammar of a traditional marriage proposal, “Will you marry me?” Traditionally it is the man who asks as does Dirk Sarrazin here.

There is a rhetoric of equality between the two which Lella calls on while at the same time calling Dirk a “demi-god”:

[s]he told him that she had loved him when first she saw him...After the weak men of Arion he had seemed like a demi-god and companionship with him through the endless day of space had shown her that here was that thing undreamt of on her planet...a mate who was an equal and a friend.

“Imagine what you are to me, whose mothers have known only the inferior men of Arion,” she said when Sarrazin told her what she was to him...all the things man looks for in man and all those he dreams of in a woman (Vaughan 1932: 373).

On Arion Dirk meets an Aronian man, Luthor, who is not like the other inferior men of Arion. Dirk “rejoiced at the proof Norria’s husband [Luthor] presented,
that the men of Arion were the victims of environment rather than of inherent weakness” (Vaughan 1932: 376). There is nothing in the text that suggests that the Earth women might also be “the victims of environment rather than of inherent weakness”.

The women use their science to move their planet closer to Earth. Dirk says of this future union:

A few generations of intermarriage between Arion and Earth would equalize somewhat the proportion of men and women here, and the situation would become normal, so that each woman could have the right to marry if she chose, and men would be free as they were in the very old days (Vaughan 1932: 377).

Dirk talks only of an improvement in the status of Aronian men, he says nothing about how the relations between Earth and Arion would affect the status of Earth women. Indeed there are no Earth women anywhere in the story. Lella and Dirk discuss their future life together. Lella says that:

Arion needs me and I cannot refuse her my services. There will be much special exploration to do once we have achieved the success of this plan (moving Arion closer to Earth), but neither can you deprive the Earth of your knowledge, or live perpetually on Arion the life of one secondary to myself. We must divide our time fairly between our two worlds. In Arion you must be Lella’s husband, though even there your position will be different and higher than that of our Aronian men. On Earth, I shall be only Dirk Sarrazin’s wife, and proud of my husband. Perhaps one day, after years of intercourse between Arion and Earth, men and women will come to have an equal importance on both planets. It is possible that we can help to bring that day closer (Vaughan 1932: 379).

Lella raises the possibility of a time when all men and all women of both planets will have “equal importance.” In the same speech, however, she accepts the status of an Earth woman while on Earth, while Dirk will enjoy superior status to Arion men though not as high as Aronian women. Also, like the Lyru women of The Girls from Planet Five (1955), Lella has shrunk. At the beginning of the text when Lella is still referred to as an ‘it’ and is still potentially male or something else, the Aronian is described as “standing a foot or so taller than [Dirk’s] own goodly height” (Vaughan 1932: 367). Once Lella has acquired the female pronoun and has agreed to be Dirk’s mate she ceases to be a foot taller and she is able to “lean against his [Dirk’s] strong shoulder” (Vaughan 1932: 376). The hegemonic force of the discourse of romance is irresistible.
In “Woman’s World” by Robert Silverberg, published in the June 1957 issue of *Imagination Science Fiction*, the hero volunteers to be put into deep sleep and sent into the future because of the “bust-up of [his] engagement” (Silverberg 1957: 110). He finds himself in a matriarchal world. The role-reversal is immediately obvious because the women are called Phil and Sam, and the men, Lola and Clara. He is seized by the men as a saviour who will lead a revolt against the women. He wakes up to discover that none of it was real, he was merely “under-going preliminary psychological tests” before being put in the “somnucasket” (Silverberg 1957: 113). On discovering that his experiences in the women-dominated world were induced dreams the hero decides not to go into the future:

I knew now that there was no sense in running off to the future; things weren’t any simpler there.

I knew what I would do: I would find my girl, take her out someplace [sic], talk over all our misunderstandings. I was confident we’d patch things up somehow.

All I had to do to make our marriage work was be a little more considerate - and let her share the responsibilities, instead of trying to run the whole show myself. Yes, I thought, as I started down the familiar dirty old twentieth-century street. Women needed to be given more responsibility in running things... (Silverberg 1957: 114).

Women need to be the Beneficiary of “more responsibility in running things” - a gift bestowed upon them by the men. If only men would treat women well the world would be a better place and open warfare between men and women would be avoided. It is no surprise that the hero’s “girl” is not the Actor in any of these clauses, no more than women are in the final sentence.

Philip Wylie’s *The Disappearance* (1951) appears to be making a similar argument to “Woman’s World” - if only men would treat women better we would

---

4 I have found two other examples of the Sex War being only a dream: “The War of the Sexes” by Edmond Hamilton first published in the November 1935 edition of *Weird Tales* and “The Superior Sex” by Miriam Allen deFord first published in the April 1968 edition of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. In “The War of the Sexes,” Allan Rand answers an advertisement for a young man without connections in search of exciting work (Hamilton 1935: 551). He is induced into a dream of a matriarchy to test whether he has “a cold-steel nerve” (Hamilton 1935: 569). He does and gets the job and the scientist’s daughter. In “The Superior Sex,” William is the guinea pig for an experiment which will be able to reveal “hidden psychological impulses” (deFord 1968: 1969: 23). The experiment is being conducted by Professor Ranleigh and his associate Janet who is William’s wife. The experiment which throws Williams into a matriarchy proves to William only that his wife is having an affair with Ranleigh.
not have the tension between the sexes that exists. The contemporary unequal relationship between men and women is the fault of the men.

In *The Disappearance*, on the fourteenth of February at 4:04 and fifty two seconds in the afternoon, all the men disappear from the world the women inhabit, and all the women from that of the men. For four years they inhabit parallel worlds. The story centres around William Percival Gaunt, mostly referred to as Gaunt, and his wife Paula and their struggles to cope with the newly unisex world. More chapters are devoted to Gaunt and the men's struggle to deal with the Disappearance (it is capitalised throughout the text) than the women's. Gaunt is called to Washington along with other experts to decide what to do. While they are gathered together the Soviets threaten to attack them. Nuclear bombs are exchanged - the USSR is devastated as is a great deal of the USA. In the women's world a Soviet ship of "liberation" comes to the USA and contact is established, the women becoming friends rather than enemies, and they pledge to help each other. The odds against the women are large because of their relative lack of professional and trade training. In the men's world there is lawlessness and fascism. In the final chapter, "Home-Coming and Conclusion," everyone returns to where they were at that final moment before the Disappearance: Gaunt at his desk, Paula in the garden, the two worlds have been reunited. They have not forgotten what happened and the world is full of joy and happiness at having survived God's trial or whatever the Disappearance was.

Kingsley Amis in *New Maps of Hell* discusses *The Disappearance* at some length, observing that only in science fiction could such an "examination not only of the part played by sex in contemporary society, but of the whole inner nature of sexual difference" take place (Amis 1960: 75). An entire chapter of *The Disappearance* consists of just this sort of speculation: "An essay on the philosophy of sex, or the lack thereof, extraneous to the narrative and yet its

---

5 Needless to say in 1951 the cold war was already underway.
theme, which the impatient may skip and the reflective might enjoy” (Wylie 1951: 216). Robert Scholes, in “A Footnote to Russ’s ‘Recent Feminist Utopias,’” has this to say about The Disappearance:

If I could add a footnote to Russ’s essay it would be to mention Philip Wylie’s neglected novel The Disappearance....But for our present purposes one important idea emerges: though both worlds are horrible enough for everyone to desire a return to a world with two sexes, the women’s world is not anywhere near as horrible as the men’s. I think Wylie reached this conclusion in spite of himself, by honest extrapolation; and I think any honest extrapolation would arrive at the same result (Scholes 1981: 86).

There is no moment when Gaunt has a sense of relief at Paula’s Disappearance whereas Paula,

[j]f she had told the truth to herself,...would have admitted that at times and in certain ways the absence of Bill had compensations....She enjoyed management free of criticism and safe from arbitrary change, change without adequate reason (from her viewpoint) and without notice. She appreciated being given, even by universal tragedy, her own way in every personal matter. She had put to good use the good brain she owned; she was in every possible respect, her family’s head as a result. Besides, in a moment of national crisis, she had been valuable. Such conditions and facts were satisfying to a hitherto frustrated element of her nature (Wylie 1951: 201).

Gaunt comes to believe that men have long been thwarting women. In his essay he writes that

woman’s dilemma has for ages been far greater than even she imagined...it was not ameliorated in modern times, and...largely male attitudes have been the occasion of it all (Wylie 1951: 228).

According to Gaunt, men have to learn that a “‘person’ is a-man-plus-a-woman; with one or the other absent, there is no person” (Wylie 1951: 233). Other male characters come to the same conclusion. Teddy, who has had a brief affair with Gaunt’s wife, Paula, asks Gaunt rhetorically, “What in hell is a woman but a part of the whole person?” (Wylie 1951: 195). And the clergyman Connauth announces after men and women are reunited: “There is only one sex, Bill! Woman, man, are halves” (Wylie 1951: 348).

In his long essay on the philosophy of sex, Gaunt stresses the sameness between men and women

The actual differences between the sexes of genus Homo are not very great. Some women are larger than most men; some have bigger brains than most men; some are stronger. It is quite possible that by the use of genetics mankind could have reversed all conventional tendencies (Wylie 1951: 228).
In stressing this sameness, *The Disappearance*, while being informed by two centuries of a predominantly two-sex model, harks back to an earlier model of the relationship between man and woman, Laqueur’s one-sex universe. Women and men, in this model, are composed of the same liquids, both excreting sperm and having the same genitalia. Women are “inverted, and hence less perfect men” (Laqueur 1990: 26). Laqueur argues that according to Galen,

> nothing could be more obvious...than to imagine women as men. For the dullard who could not grasp the point immediately, Galen offers a step-by-step thought experiment:

> Think first, please, of the man’s [external genitalia] turned in and extending inward between the rectum and the bladder. If this should happen the scrotum would necessarily take the place of the uterus with the testes lying outside, next to it on either side. The penis becomes the cervix and vagina, the perineum becomes the female pudenda, and so forth on through various ducts and blood vessels (Laqueur 1990: 30).

Both men and women produce semen: “male and female semen...stand in the same relationship to blood that penis and vagina stand to genital anatomy, extruded and still-inside organs” (Laqueur 1990: 40). This understanding of the relationship between male and female biology is echoed in *The Disappearance*:

> Mankind has everywhere emphasized the sex differences. He has only recently known much of the identities and parallels.

> The epithelial cords from the seminiferous tubes - or the mesenchyme. The Graafian follicle comes into being in one sex; in the other, from the same tissue, a transitory network in the mesovarium. The mesovarium in the female is, in the male foetus, mesorchium. Paroophoron and organ of Giralde; common Wolffian duct - and Mullerian duct, becoming Fallopian tubes, uterus, and perhaps vagina in the female, uterus masculinus in the male. So, endlessly, the anatomical parallel continues. And while each emergent body of protoplasm takes up its appointed form and situation, neither male nor female lacks in embryo the same entities, or their rudiments or vestiges. Our outward organs appear greatly different only to the mind that does not intimately know how alike they are and of what identical tissues they have been composed. How superficial, then, how ignorant it is to postulate an important differentness of spermatozoa or ova, clitoris or penis or any other aspect or characteristic of the sexes! (Wylie 1951: 229).

And later,

> We - male and female - are the same flesh and the flesh is beautiful. We have all the same organs, differing only in speciality. The same chemicals course in us both. When we love each other it is the same love. When we lie together we are in solemn truth that One. And until men made it so, in prestigious excesses of egotism, no such thing existed as a woman and no such thing existed as a man (Wylie 1951: 233).

Gaunt, like the editorial blurbs I examined in the previous chapter, refers to the discovery of hormones. However, for Gaunt hormones are a sign of sameness not difference. His arguments have more in common with Oudorshoon’s (1994) arguments about sex hormones. In Gaunt’s essay he writes:
Lately we have discovered “sex” hormones: male, female. To the disquietude of some, we have also learned that each sex possesses both and that no more than a slight preponderance of one over the other exists in either sex. With pragmatic zeal we have caused cockcows to grow on hens and found that female hormones relieve to some degree cancerous conditions of the prostate. We have even somewhat changed personality by injection, and disoriented libido. We might have done better. We might, for instance have wondered more what such facts mean (Wylie 1951: 230).

These arguments have much in common with many liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor and Betty Friedan - to name some examples over the past three hundred years - who accept “the underlying conception of human nature” but feel that there has been a startling omission, a blunder, in the treatment of women (Jaggar 1982: 21).

Yet, the model Laqueur outlines is most emphatically not one of equality:

*man* is the measure of all things, and woman does not exist as an ontologically distinct category. Not all males are masculine, potent, honorable, or hold power, and some women exceed some men in each of these categories. But the standard of the human body and its representation is the male body (Laqueur 1999: 62).

Despite Gaunt’s long arguments for the sameness of the two sexes, and the injustice of man’s tyranny over woman, the text ends with the restoration of the old sexual order. Paula’s daughter, Edwinna, has been doing back-breaking work during the Disappearance, including hunting and farming. However, her newfound independence and self-reliance makes her realise that she really loved her first husband and that she wants to be a wife again:

I thought I was just a glamour-puss, for sale to the highest bidder...I thought he was weak and that was unfair and I thought the world was mean. I never tried to help Charlie. I didn’t know what I had to try with. Now...I do know. I ought to be quite a wife, for any guy! And I picked him first, after all. In some ways, some very important ways, Charlie was a man!

Paula, who has spent the whole book leading a community, working hard and making endless decisions, discovers that she is a feeler not a thinker (Wylie 1951: 350). In the last few pages Paula asks her husband leading questions so that he can pontificate out loud:6

---

6 There is a long tradition in science fiction of the female character performing this function. Sam J. Landwall notes this phenomenon:
The classic function of the woman... was to follow the hero as a kind of reverentially listening Dr. Watson. By her obvious ignorance of the most elementary things she would give the hero the opportunity to launch into long explanations as to why the devious
“Did God do it, Bill?”

“Well who made God? I don’t mean the real one that we have hardly tried to learn about. The God of the universe. Of evolution. Of instinct. Of the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. I mean, the squalid gods made in men’s images that men worshipped” (Wylie 1951: 349).

Gaunt even explains to her how a man has explained to him what she, Paula, feels:

Teddy made me perceive what you felt, that it never occurred to me any women really felt. So look, Paula. I don’t own you. I am you (Wylie 1951: 350).

In fact the text echoes Gaunt’s ideas about the ways in which men have tried to suppress women, because whenever there are men and women present the men dominate. In the chapters where there are no men, the women have as many long speeches as the men do in their chapters. When the worlds are re-united in the final chapter there are no long speeches from the women about the new world they are all facing. The longest speech by a woman is the one I quoted above from Edwinna on her desire to be a good wife. By contrast, Jim, a neighbour, gives a ten line speech on the new world: “There is a passion in the hearts of all” (Wylie 1951: 343); Connaught has a seventeen line speech which leads to his announcement that “[t]here is only one sex” (Wylie 1951: 348); and Gaunt has a series of speeches. One is twenty lines long: “The blunder of both sexes, that grew out of their insane sense of separateness!” (Wylie 1951: 349-50). Paula’s longest speeches are of five lines and are explanations for Gaunt of what happened in the time they were apart (Wylie 1951: 342, 345). Gaunt dominates the final chapter and he is the most frequently recurring Theme. The men and Gaunt dominate the book with eleven chapters given to their experience under the Disappearance while the women have only seven. It is the men who make the discovery that men and women are two halves of a whole and they then announce it to the women. The women in their part of the text do far less overt philosophising and

once white women and their men are restored to each other they revert to their secondary role as helpmeet and angel of the house.

This notion of *The Disappearance*, that women and men are two halves of a whole, is as predicated on heterosexuality as are the Pygmalion/Galatea texts which I discussed in the previous chapter. On the back flap of the dust jacket there is "Mr Wylie's own comment" which bears this out:

I became appalled by the ageless human view of women which holds them to be "second class" persons....I suddenly appreciated a long-standing blunder of our species....man...has perverted the truth, grading women down to enhance egotistical assumptions and so, ineluctably, degrading his whole kind. The fact is, *no such thing as "man" or "woman" exists; one sex without the other has neither past nor future and is but death...."

Carl Jung, viewing man in Nature...observed that *instinct* provides impulses for all we call "good" as well as all we call "evil". Only man has attributed goodness to his conscious will and eschewed evil as a property of beasts. If Jung's observation is correct....it follows...that the old blunder could be undone, the chasm bridged, and the two sexes reintegrated, at which point woman would be restored to humanity and man to love. So my novel became a love story, a new kind (Wylie 1951: From the dust jacket cover flap).

*The Disappearance* is indeed a love story though I am not sure how new it is. There are many similarities with love stories like *Who Needs Men?* where Rura discovers that "[w]omen are not a species, they are only part of a species" and that "[t]here is a fine tuning between men and women" (Cooper [1972] 1974: 96). This is the language that Jane resorted to in "Consider Her Ways" when she tries to convince Laura that a world without men is a nightmare world, "[l]ots of us were complementary. We were pairs who formed units" (Wyndham [1956] 1965: 59).

This ‘equality’ between the sexes is something bestowed by men and is dependent on heterosexual love. *The Disappearance* like *Who Needs Men?* does include homosexuality as an option. But as in *Who Needs Men?* it is unnatural and both protagonists reject it. Paula turns down the attractive young Kate with the following words, "I'm not a child, thank God! Good night, dear" (Wylie 1951: 256). While Gaunt says, "Infantile business, homosexuality. Immature and unfortunate" (Wylie 1951: 145).

Like the narrow class of real men and real women of the texts I discussed in the last chapter, those who are part of the man plus women equals person
equation are still a small group. Those who indulge in same-sex love, male or female, are ruled out, as are African American women (there are no African American men in the text). When the Disappearance occurs Paula Gaunt allows Hester, her maid, to camp in tents in the garden with Hester’s daughters and her granddaughters and other black families. Only one other garden resident is referred to by name, Hester’s oldest daughter, Margot. This is when Paula graciously offers Hester’s family refuge from the hurricane in the big house (Wylie 1951: 238). While Hester and Margot and their other female relations are camped in the yard, many of the white women of the neighbourhood move into the house so that all the white women can work and organise together. The gulf between the two groups is thus made abundantly clear. When the women and men are re-united, only Hester loses control:

A confused ululation came from the rear of the house.

“It’s Hester,” Paula said quickly, “having hysterics, poor darling! I’ll go talk to her” (Wylie 1951: 337).

Throughout the text Hester and her relatives are referred to as belonging to Paula Gaunt, they are part of “her coloured colony” ([my italics] Wylie 1951: 201).

In the world of The Disappearance the only axis of oppression is that of sex. If men learn to treat women better and give them more responsibilities, the world will be a much better place. That the ‘coloured’ people in the text are also second class citizens - only allowed inside the big house in times of hurricane - is not mentioned. Indeed, in both “Woman’s World” and The Disappearance it is the white men who are responsible for doing something to make the world more

---

7 The Disappearance is one of the few battle of the sexes texts that includes people who are not white. In Keller’s “The Feminine Metamorphosis” (1929) which I discussed in the last chapter, part of the action takes place in China, but the only role any Chinese people play in the action is to supply the evil American women with glands from their diseased bodies. In “The Judging of the Priestess” (1940) the enemy are the Japans who are the descendants of the Japanese who moved to Mexico, they are short and ‘ugly’, and they are all of them male. David H. Keller’s “The Little Husbands” (1928) and Dwight V. Swain’s “Drummers of Daugavo” (1943) are set in the Amazon Basin and Clark Ashton Smith “The Root of Amput” (1945) is set in Malaya. All three stories take place amidst “native” matriarchies. The majority of the other sex battle texts make no mention of the race of their protagonists and are illustrated with representations of clean-cut ‘white’ folk.
equal. These texts are concerned with specific men's journeys toward discovering their own privilege and part of what that privilege is built upon.

The heterosexual economy with its basic unit of one man plus one woman is also at the centre of Amazon Planet. Joanna Russ describes the text as having "a role reversal facade... armed female guards and simpering men - only to reveal beneath it a peaceful and substantially egalitarian world" (Russ 1980: 13). Guy Thomas/Ronny Bronston is an operative for Section G of the Bureau of Investigation of the United Planets. He is sent to Amazonia, a female-ruled planet, undercover as an interplanetary trade commissioner to discover more about the planet. The Amazonian government give him an armed escort of Amazonian warriors dressed in bronze sandals and short skirts to protect him from other Amazonian warriors who might want to marry him. The majority of the novel takes place amidst this role reversal world where an 'effeminate' man is one who behaves in a 'masculine' way:

When they got into the small living room, before looking around, Guy said, "Look... The next person, man, woman, or child that makes another crack suggesting I'm effeminate, I'm going to award a very fat lip!"
His guide was taken aback. "A very fat lip?" he wavered.
"A bust in the mouth."

There are many similar passages where Guy/Ronny's exaggerated masculinity is mocked. At the end of Amazon Planet Guy/Ronny discovers that the wimpy men and Amazon women are all actors trying to prevent him from discovering how Amazonia actually operates. The last three chapters consist of explanations and justifications of Amazonia's social system which supports Amis' claims about sf's "readiness to theorise and debate" (Amis 1960: 74). These chapters are also a neat role reversal of the science fiction motif of woman as ear, for it is women, the two civil rulers of the two continents of Amazonia, the Myrine and the Hippolyte, who give the explanations, and Guy/Ronny who listens and asks

---

8 Amazon Planet was first published in three parts in the December 1966, January and February 1967 issues of Analog and was published in paperback form by Ace in 1975.
questions like, "When did you stop having a military?" The answer, is, "[f]rom the beginning. We're women, remember" (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 183). Then there are longer passages of explanation:

You see, at first I imagine we were something like the Mormons who settled Utah back in old times. We had a multitude of ideas, principles, beliefs, and a great deal of faith in what, as we look back at it today, was obviously extremism. But we were no incompetents. And like the Mormons we quickly became pragmatic. Just as they gave up their polygamy when it proved impractical, we gave up the domination of one sex over the other. Not so quickly, perhaps, but step by step.

...[W]hen our first colony ships landed all property was community owned, save, of course, personal things. Our original ideas of a female-dominated socioeconomic commonwealth proved nonsense within the year. The smallest unit of a life form is that unit which can reproduce itself. In the case of the human race, a woman and a man (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 182).

The relationship is of course that between men and women who are the basic unit of the human race. So as in The Disappearance "a-man-plus-a-woman" is the core of humanity (Wylie 1951: 233).

Much of Amazon Planet is in the same parodic mode as Search the Sky, (1954), or "Ecce Femina!" (1972). The me-warrior routine of Minythyia and the simpering of Podner Bates parody previous sex-battle worlds like that of "The Priestess Who Rebelled" (1939). There is even a moment when Guy/Ronny is told to shut up by a woman (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 103).

Unlike The Disappearance, there is no mention of any sexuality but heterosexuality. Patricia O'Gara, a recent migrant to Amazonia, explains to Guy/Ronny about Amazonian laws on sexuality and marriage:

Amazonians don't believe in restricting personal relationships with too many laws. Actually, though, usage frowns on promiscuity and having close relations with even two or three persons at a time is considered rather far-out. However, some people are just built that way. They're not one-man women, or one-woman men. You've had the problem down through the ages (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 145).

The heterosexual unit is still at the centre of society - there is no mention of one-woman women, or one-man men.
The cover of the January 1957 issue of Venture Science Fiction illustrating Poul Anderson's "Virgin Planet". The cover is by Emsh.
When It Changed: A Different Kind of Female Rule

The cover from Venture magazine shown opposite illustrates Poul Anderson’s Virgin Planet (1957). In this story a male explorer discovers an all-female world where the women, in Russ’ words, “span the whole range of human temperaments and activities” (Russ 1980: 13). The women have “sweet-hearts” amongst themselves but one group of women, the Whitleys, have never had a sweetheart (Anderson [1957] 1973: 23). Two of the Whitleys spend the novel fighting over the hero. The significance of the Phallus is spelled out on the first page when Barbara Whitley sees the explorer’s spaceship:

The thing stood upright, aflash with steel pride, like a lean war-dart, though it lacked fins. As a huntress and arbaelester the corporal was necessarily a good judge of spatial relationships, and she estimated its height as forty meters (Anderson [1957] 1973: 5).

In Joanna Russ’ “When It Changed”, men arrive on an all-female world, called Whileaway and the women do not melt when they meet the possessors of the long lost phallus.10 Terry Carr refers to “When it Changed” in his 1975 editorial on women’s progress within science fiction. He cites the story as an example of this progress, as a “blow struck for sexual rationality” and gives the following plot synopsis:

[the story] opened with a lost Earth colony on some distant planet where all the men died long ago and the women learned to reproduce parthenogenetically. They’ve established a workable and happy society and pretty much forgotten, over the centuries that men ever existed. Then a spaceship from Earth happens to land on the planet, rediscovering this lost colony, and the men in the crew go around looking amazed at how plucky and resourceful the little ladies have been, and telling them rather pityingly that their long exile is over, The Men Are Here. The women just look at them blankly and wonder what the hell they’re talking about (Carr 1975: 124).

The inversion of the sexbattle mythos whereby the women, or at least one real woman, would be glad that the men have returned is undone. Terry Carr applauds this and notes that the story “promptly won the Nebula Award as the

---

9 Virgin Planet was first published in the January 1957 issue of Venture Science Fiction and first published as a paperback in 1959. There is more on Poul Anderson’s engagement with the battle of the sexes in chapter six.

10 First published in the 1972 anthology Again, Dangerous Visions. The story won the Nebula award for best short story for that year. The Nebulas are awarded by the SFWA - Science Fiction Writers of America.
best short story of the year” (Carr 1975: 124). This for Carr is another sign of science fiction’s progress.

Susan Wood in her guest editorial for the Spring 1978 issue of the feminist fanzine, Janus also comments on the impact of Russ’ work in the early 1970s:

I remember a talk Joanna [Russ] gave, I think at the Toronto Secondary Universe conference in 1972, wittily reversing sex roles; woman makes rite of passage into adulthood by killing bear, etc (Wood 1978: 5).

This is a reference to the rite of passage in “When It Changed.” Janet is thinking of her daughter, Yuki:

Someday soon, like all of them, she will disappear for weeks on end to come back grimy and proud, having knifed her first cougar or shot her first bear, dragging some abominably dead beastie behind her, which I will never forgive for what it might have done to my daughter (Russ [1972] 1983: 4).

The narrator, Janet, describes her first sighting of men:

They are bigger than we are. They are bigger and broader. Two were taller than me, and I am extremely tall, one meter, eighty centimeters in my bare feet. They are obviously of our species but off, indescribably off, and as my eyes could not and still cannot quite comprehend the lines of those alien bodies, I could not, then, bring myself to touch them, though the one who spoke Russian - what voices they have! - wanted to “shake hands,” a custom from the past I imagine. I can only say they were apes with human faces. He seemed to mean well, but I found myself shuddering back almost the length of the kitchen - and then I laughed apologetically - and then to set a good example (interstellar amity, I thought) did “shake hands” finally. A hard, hard hand. They are heavy as draft horses. Blurred deep voices (Russ [1972] 1983: 5).


This response to a first view of the manly form leaves the heterosexual unit of man plus woman equals person behind. Woman as love interest, woman who is not yet a woman until she is completed and moulded into being by heterosexual penetration, is absent. Nor is the one-sex world in view where “man is the measure of all things, and woman does not exist as an ontologically distinct category” (Laqueur 1990: 62). For the men who have just arrived on Whileaway men are still the measure of all things and they ask “Where are all the people?” They are told about the plague. The question is repeated:
“Where are all the people?” said the monomaniac.
I realized then that he didn’t mean people, he meant men, and he was giving the word
the meaning it had not had on Whileaway for six centuries (Russ [1972] 1983: 6-7).

People are men, but for Janet people are women. The two groups, the women of
Whileaway, and the men from Earth operate in completely different paradigms.
Janet tells the men where the men of Whileaway are:

I thought we had pollexed him. He caught his breath. He made as if to get out of the
chair he was sitting in; he put his hand to his chest; he looked around at us with the
strangest blend of awe and sentimental tenderness. Then he said, solemnly and earnestly:
“A great tragedy.”
I waited not quite understanding.
“Yes,” he said, catching his breath again with that queer smile, that adult-to-child
smile that tells you something is being hidden and will be presently produced with cries

For the Whileawayans the men’s arrival is the tragedy and Katy, Janet’s wife,
even tries to kill one of the men but is stopped by Janet who regrets it: “Katy
was right, of course; we should have burned them down where they stood” (Russ

The men tell them that “sexual equality has been re-established on Earth”
and that the Whileawayan world is “unnatural” (Russ [1972] 1983: 8-9). Katy
counters that “humanity is unnatural” (Russ [1972] 1983: 9). The leader of the
male party agrees:

“Humanity is unnatural. I should know. I have metal in my teeth and metal pins here.”
He touched his shoulder. “Seals are harem animals...and so are men; apes are
promiscuous and so are men; doves are monogamous and so are men; there are even
celibate men and homosexual men. There are homosexual cows I believe. But Whileaway
is still missing something.”

...You know it intellectually, of course. There is only half a species here. Men must

There is a need to restore the “natural order of things”, the heterosexual
 economy, but the Whileawayans are not willing to become real women. They
resist the romance narrative which should swing into play when the men arrive.
There is no joy here at the reunion. Janet muses:

[our ancestors’ journals are one long cry of pain and I suppose I ought to be glad now
but one can’t throw away six centuries, or even (as I have lately discovered) thirty-four
It is no longer an equation that makes any sense, men have become “ten foot toads”. This all-female world challenges the equation by eliding it altogether.

“When it Changed” is the first text in this period in which the case for heterosexuality has to be put at all:

“There’s been too much genetic damage in the last few centuries. Radiation. Drugs. We can use Whileaway’s genes, Janet.” Strangers do not call strangers by their first names. “You can have cells enough to drown in,” I said. “Breed your own.”

He smiled. “That’s not the way we want to do it. You know as well as I do that parthenogenic culture has all sorts of inherent defects, and we do not - if we can help it - mean to use you for anything of the sort. pardon me; I should not have said ‘use.’ But surely you can see that this kind of society is unnatural” (Russ [1972] 1983: 8-9).

The man’s mistake here is telling, for that is exactly what these men plan to do. The Earth men want to ‘use’ the women of Whileaway - they want to get access to those genes in a ‘natural’ way - through heterosexual penetrative sex. To do otherwise would continue these women’s existence outside the patriarchal heterosexual order, outside the discourse of romance. Janet’s offer to give them all the genes they want is not enough. A society that is outside the heterosexual economy is unnatural. This is the absolute given of every other battle of the sexes texts from 1926 to 1973. This text marks a crucial shift in the battle of the sexes texts and is indeed a moment “When It Changed”.
Hermaphroditism

(i) Correcting Hermaphroditus

Indeed, how could one separate the idea of subordination from the existence of the sexes? Gabrice de Foigny's remarkably fictitious land of Australia (1753), a utopia of hermaphrodites, shows how close the link between the two was perceived to be. The Australian, in whom the sexes were one, could not understand how a conflict of wills could be avoided within the "mutual possession" of European marriage. The French traveller answered that it was simple, for mother and child were both subject to the father. The hermaphrodite, horrified at such a violation of the total autonomy that was the sign of complete true "men", dismissed the European pattern as bestial. (Davis 1975: 128)11

"How could one separate the idea of subordination from the existence of the sexes?" is a very important opening question. The response in the seventeenth-century text cited above is to remove sexual difference altogether and replace it with Hermaphrodites or androgynes. This solution to the conflict between women and men has also been posited in science fiction, although texts with this approach to the Sex War are rare in the period 1926-1973. In this section I discuss Proud Man (1934), Venus Plus X (1960), and The Left Hand of Darkness (1969).12

The term hermaphrodite comes from the name of the first hermaphrodite, Hermaphroditus, son of Aphrodite and Hermes. A version of Hermaphroditus' story is told at some length in Ovid's Metamorphoses. According to Ovid, he was so beautiful that

[e]ven blushing became him: his cheeks were the colour of ripe apples, hanging in a sunny orchard, like painted ivory or like the moon when, in eclipse, she shows a reddish hue beneath her brightness (Ovid [1955] 1964: 103).

When he was fifteen he went travelling until he came across a pool of water. In this pool lived the naiad, Salmacis. The moment she saw Hermaphroditus she

---

11 Gabrice de Foigny's text was written and published before the eighteenth century European 'discovery' of Australia.
was lust-struck and set about luring him into the water. Once he had entered the water, Salmacis tried to kiss him. Hermaphroditus struggled but “she twined around him, like a serpent”. As she held him, Salmacis called out to the Gods, “grant me this, may no time to come ever separate him from me, or me from him!” Her prayers were answered instantly

for, as they lay together, their bodies were united and from being two persons they became one....when their limbs met in that clinging embrace the nymph and the boy were no longer two, but a single form, possessed of a dual nature, which could not be called male or female, but seemed to be at once both and neither (Ovid [1955] 1964: 104).

Hermaphroditus called to his parents and begged them to change the waters of the pool

if any man enter this pool, may he depart hence no more than half a man, may he suddenly grow weak and effeminate at the touch of these waters (Ovid [1955] 1964: 104).

Both his parents were moved with compassion, and granted this request of their child, who was now but half male, and half female. In this formulation hermaphroditism is something that makes a man effeminate, that takes something away from him so that he becomes “no more than half a man” (Ovid [1955] 1964: 104).

Hugh Hampton Young (M.A., M.D., SC.D., F.R.C.S.I., & D.S.M) in his extremely influential 1937 text *Genital Abnormalities, Hermaphroditism & Related Adrenal Diseases*, gives a brief overview of the various accounts of Hermaphroditus’ story. He is unhappy to concede that Ovid’s account is the most well known and finds it “amazing” that the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* accept Ovid’s “fantastic version” to which there are many “obvious objections...especially from a medical standpoint” (Young 1937: 5). Apparently water cannot really turn a man into an hermaphrodite!

Despite Young’s disapproval of Ovid’s “fantastic version”, there is a basic similarity between Ovid and Young’s view of hermaphroditism. For both, hermaphroditism is a problem. In Young’s pioneering text book, and in every other medical text book I looked at, hermaphroditism is something that must be corrected. In Young’s book the actual or most viable sex for each individual
intersex has to be determined before the correction can be made. Is the intersex really a man or a woman? The questions that are pertinent in making this decision are not just which set of genitalia is more viable but also social questions such as what is the sexual preference of the intersex? If s/he prefers to have "sexual relations with" (Young's phrase) men then the preference is to make the body female. Does s/he look more like a woman or a man?

In Proud Man, Venus Plus X and The Left Hand of Darkness, hermaphroditism or androgy ny is transformed from a problem that must be surgically corrected into a possible solution to the problem of difference between men and women.

Unlike the other battle of the sexes text which I have been discussing in this and the previous chapter Proud Man was not published as part of the American pulp magazine tradition of science fiction.\textsuperscript{13} The book, by Katherine Burdekin writing under the name of Murray Constantine, was published in England in 1934.\textsuperscript{14} It is written in the form of a report on Earth by an alien visitor to England in the early 1930s. The alien, who is named Alethea Verona when passing for a woman, has visited England through a dream. While there Verona spends time with three different "subhumans". Each of Verona's encounters is covered in a separate part of Proud Man. Part II is "The Priest," Part III "The Woman," and Part IV "The Man." Part I is called "The Person" and sets out the reasons for writing the account and explains the difference between the inhabitants of England and Verona's own hermaphrodite race:

You will understand by this time the subhumans are of two sexes, like animals, birds, fish and insects. If evolution is a fact, the whole course of human evolution would seem to be from a single-sexed unconscious being, such as an ameba, to a single-sexed conscious being such as you or I. The subhumans were beyond the animal stage, as they were certainly partially conscious, but they were still-two sexed mammals. They had abandoned a breeding season, and the interest of one sex in another was constant. They

\textsuperscript{13} Proud Man was brought to my attention by Don Keller, science fiction fan and publisher and editor, who kindly gave me a copy of the 1933 Feminist Press edition.

\textsuperscript{14} Burdekin was not publicly known to be Murray Constantine until the 1980s. Daphne Patai writes that with the cooperation of friends, and of her publishers as well, Burdekin covered the tracks of her real identity quite effectively. As a result, when, in the early 1980s, I grew interested in Murray Constantine, it took considerable effort to learn that she was indeed Katherine Burdekin (Patai 1989: 165).
bore their young alive, and fed it at the breast. They had no conception of a person, that
is an entity independent of others both physically and emotionally, who is self-fertilizing,
and can produce young, if it wishes to, alone and without help. No person so far as I
could discover, had yet been born, though there have been cases of a clumsy sex fusion,
making it difficult to say whether the individual was a male or a female. But such freaks,
as subhumans call all their fellows who differ markedly from themselves, were not true
persons, with a human mind or consciousness; and, as far as I know, I was, during the
two years of my dream, the only person extant. The idea that one individual should be
both male and female, wholly and practically and conveniently within itself, was
repugnant to them, even though their bisexuality was the cause of unbelievable pain,
discomfort, and grief (Burdekin [1934] 1993: 22-3).

Once again a person equals a man plus a woman but this time the man and the
woman are contained in the same body. The person, who narrates the book, is
also outside the discourse of romantic love which in The Disappearance (1951)
and Amazon Planet (1966) coheres the unit of man plus woman together. This
idea is, however, articulated within Proud Man by the woman, Leonora, who is
the subject of Part III:

But I and my lover will be quite different. We shall not be two people, we shall be a unit. A
unit of far more power than either of us would be separately. We shall do the same work,

Later Verona asks Leonora if she has thought about the children of her “units of
lovers”, wouldn’t they be different to children of more “disunited” “antagonistic”
pairs? Verona suggests that

“with such perfect understanding between the parents children might in time be born
who united the whole natures of the lovers in themselves, even to their own sexes.”
“Oh no,” cried Leonora. “There would be no more lovers, and the children would be
cold, cold. They must stop short of that.”
“Now you are like your children who say they won’t grow up. How dull to be grown
up, they say. Yet you like coldness. You like to have me with you.

“Naturally being sexual, you don’t want to be without sex. But being reasonable, you
should not mind evolution” (Burdekin [1934] 1993: 191-2).

As did Jane in ‘Consider her ways’ (1956), Leonora finds the idea of a world
without romantic love appalling. “One of you is lovely,” she says, “A world of
you is terrifying” (Burdekin [1934] 1993: 192). This underlines how essential
romance is to the formation of subjectivity. Leonora can not comprehend a world
in which subjectivity would be formed in such a radically different way. For
Leonora, Verona and her people are like the women of “The Last Man” who “no
longer having need of sex, dropped it like a worn-out cloak and became sexless”
(West [1929] 1972: 108-9); or the men in “The Last Woman” whom a drug allows
to turn "[a]ll the energies" that had been wasted on "sex and the emotional side of life" to "thought and work" (Gardner [1932] 1972: 134). Or indeed the women of the matriarchy in "Consider Her Ways" (1956) who have escaped the enslavement of romantic love. Verona's people escape romantic love by being hermaphrodite - a fusion of the perfect man and perfect woman and their love for each other. In this way romantic love is transcended. Verona's people are the apotheosis of romantic love, its fulfilment, but that means her people are neither heterosexual nor homosexual, they are asexual.

(ii) Crime's Offspring

[F]or a long time hermaphrodites were criminals, or crime's offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union.

(Foucault [1976] 1981: 38)

The centrality of sex and of romantic love to Leonora's sense of herself is crucial. If you are neither man nor woman how can you signify within the economy of heterosexuality? Indeed the word 'hermaphrodite' and various corruptions have been used to refer to homosexuals. The term, 'moffie' derived from 'hermaphrodite' is a South African equivalent for the Australian term 'poofta' (Branford 1987: 226). An hermaphrodite is neither man nor woman and so in the West, especially since the 1960s, hermaphrodite bodies have been altered. Modern surgical techniques prevent the blurring of the distinctions between the two true sexes and their place within the heterosexual economy.

According to a 1990 textbook on paediatrics, "[m]ajor problems arise when the genitalia are malformed to the extent where the gender cannot readily be identified" (Warne 1990: 474). In 1969, English physicians, Christopher J. Dewhurst & Ronald R. Gordon wrote about a newborn hermaphrodite:

One can only attempt to imagine the anguish of the parents. That a newborn should have a deformity...[affecting] so fundamental an issue as the very sex of the child...is a tragic event... conjuring up visions of a hopeless psychological misfit doomed to live always as a sexual freak in loneliness and frustration (qtd. Fausto-Sterling 1993: 23).
To exist legally and socially, for the past two hundred years, a body has needed to be sexed male or female. In the introduction to *Hercule Barbin* Foucault writes:

> everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity: as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory. From the medical point of view, this meant that when confronted with a hermaphrodite, the doctor was no longer concerned with recognizing the presence of the two sexes, juxtaposed or intermingled, or with knowing which of the two prevailed over the other, but rather with deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances (Foucault [1980] 1987: viii).

Judith Butler in a footnote to her article “Sexual Inversions”, discusses Foucault’s claims about the category of sex and the way it “constitutes and regulates what will and will not be an intelligible and recognisable human existence” (Butler 1992: 353). Butler writes that the political question for Foucault, and for those who read him now, is not whether “improperly sexed” beings should or should not be treated fairly… The question is whether, if improperly sexed, such a being can even be a being, a human being, a subject, one whom the law can condone or condemn…. The journals of Hercule Barbin, the hermaphrodite…demonstrate the violence of the law that would legislate identity on a body that resists it. But Hercule is to some extent a figure for a sexual ambiguity or inconsistency that emerges at the site of bodies and that contest the category of subject and its univocal or self-identical “sex” (Butler 1992: 353-4).

In Sturgeon’s *Venus Plus X* (1960) this violence is overt: when the human Charlie Johns discovers that the hermaphrodite race, the Ledom, are not a “natural” mutation but a self-imposed surgical alteration he is appalled and declares that humans would “exterminate you down to the last queer kid…and stick that one in a side-show” (Sturgeon 1960: 152). According to the *American Dictionary of Slang* queer meaning homosexual has been in “common use since c1925” (Wentworth & Flexner 1960: 415). If you are not heterosexual, according to Charlie Johns, you must be homosexual. However, it could be argued that the queerness of the hermaphrodite body puts it outside dichotomous sexuality and that the Ledom are both heterosexual and homosexual.
(iii) Leaking Bodies

In September 1960, a book, billed as “the strangest science fiction novel Theodore Sturgeon has ever written” (which was as much to say the strangest anyone had ever written) called Venus Plus X was first published. The cover of the first edition is reproduced on the facing page. In Venus Plus X the sexual inequality of 1950s middle-America is contrasted with a supposedly future utopia where the Ledom which spells model backwards, are “biologically androgynous”, being equipped with both male and female “sexual equipment”. All of the Ledom can impregnate and be impregnated. This is different from reproduction in Proud Man which only requires one “person”. Most of Venus Plus X is concerned with the story of Charlie Johns, who wakes up and finds himself in the world of the Ledom. They show him their world, explain its workings and ask for his verdict. This narrative is interspersed with the interaction between Herb and Jeanette Raile in suburban America on questions of sex and sexuality.

Venus Plus X is the first of the battle of the sexes texts published within the field of science fiction to postulate altering the bodies of women and men as a solution to the Sex War. This is a different approach from Keller’s “The Feminine Metamorphosis” (1929) where the alteration of ‘natural’ womanly bodies is viewed as an abomination and an act directly contrary to the will of God.

Venus Plus X explicitly locates itself within the sf battle of the sexes tradition. Herb and Jeanette discuss The Disappearance or rather Herb tells Jeanette about it even though she has already read it:

He [Wylie] says people made their big mistake when first they started to forget the similarity between men and women and began to concentrate on the difference. He calls that the original sin. He blames it for all wars and all persecutions. He says that because of it we’ve lost all but a trickle of the ability to love (Sturgeon 1960: 73).

15 In 1961 it ran as a four part serial in the January, February, March and April editions of the British magazine New Worlds.
And like *The Disappearance* (1951) it is Herb who considers the big questions and explains them to Jeanette.

While *The Disappearance* and *Amazon Planet* argue for a recognition of the basic sameness between the sexes, the "actual differences between the sexes of genus *Homo* are not very great" (Wylie 1951: 228) as the solution to the battle, *Venus Plus X* sees the biological difference or humans' perceptions of it as too huge an obstacle to equality. For equality to be possible, biology, for at least a time, has to be remade and physical difference has to be removed. In Gatens' discussion of the sex/gender dichotomy she refers to the desire to efface (or ignore) difference between the sexes. She writes about

the claimed necessity of the neutralising of sexual difference. For example Firestone's "cybernetic communism", proposed the literal neutering of bodies by means of the complete technologization, and hence socialisation, of the reproductive capacity (Gatens [1983] 1996: 17).

*Venus Plus X*, published ten years before Shulamith Firestone's 1970 feminist tract, *The Dialectic of Sex*, and in a completely different field, also sees biology as the problem but posits a slightly different solution. In Firestone's text the solution is cybernetic wombs which remove the necessity for "clumsy," "inefficient," "painful" childbirth (Firestone [1970] 1988: 224). In Sturgeon's text everyone gives birth because all of the Ledom possess penis, womb and vagina. The result is the same: inequality, which stems from physical difference is removed. Same bodied experience equals tolerance equals peace and understanding. And these Ledom bodies are almost identical: Charlie Johns, taken from Earth's past to judge his humanity's future, has great difficulty telling the Ledom apart. They are all roughly the same height, and shape. Only their dress sense distinguishes them. There is no mention of skin colour, although the accompanying illustrations in the *New Worlds* serialisation show the Ledom as white.

The story of the Ledom is threaded with that of Herb and Jeanette Raile. In their world there is no neat solution. The only conclusions that Herb and Jeanette reach is that they love each other and that they love their child. They
are not two halves of one whole and frequently they do not understand each other but the safety of the nuclear family will have to do.

In the postscript to the first edition of *Venus Plus X* Sturgeon writes that it “was my aim in writing *Venus Plus X* to, a) write a decent book, b) about sex” (Sturgeon 1960: 160). The implication is that although the earlier sexbattle stories may have fulfilled the second condition they definitely did not fulfil the first. *Venus Plus X* takes up where the less “decent” battle of the sexes texts I discussed in the previous chapter left off. Those texts close with the union of the hero and the heroine and the array of different sexed bodies neatly forgotten. However, this array of sexed bodies still manages to leak out of these texts. Sturgeon’s *Venus Plus X* is an attempt to make use of some of this leakage. Ironically, however, it manages to shut down the range of bodies that had emerged from the earlier texts by surgically altering every one into a version of the same.

The Ledom may be equipped with a womb but they are breastless and appear to be men. One of the first observations of the story’s narrator, Charlie Johns, is that he “saw no women” (Sturgeon 1960: 16). Later revelations of the “true” nature of the Ledom’s sex do not dispel this impression of an all male world.

There are parallels between *Venus Plus X* and Ovid’s tale of Hermaphroditus. The naiad Salmacis’ plea for eternal unity with the beautiful boy leaves her with nothing, not even a self. She has become a component of Hermaphroditus in much the same way that the Ledom are women and men transformed into men with additional female parts.

Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass argue in their “Fetishizing Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe” that Ovid’s tale is an example of

the absorption of the Other into the Same. For if Hermaphroditus’s name suggests the intertwining of male and female, the name is that of a boy who, even as he intertwines with Salmacis, erases her name; henceforth, the name is transformed from the conjunction of two genders to the absorption of the woman’s name into the man’s, paradoxically at the very moment of the submission of the man to the woman (Jones and Stallybrass 1991: 88).
This encounter and absorption is echoed in traditional marriage vows when the woman is submerged into her husband’s name. The hermaphrodite in this light is not the unity of two producing another kind of being - the hermaphrodite is half a man:

His prayer to the gods to make other swimmers leave the pond “less than men” obliterates the nymph as active ingredient in the metamorphosis. She is present not as the female half of a hermaphrodite but as the drainer away of Hermaphroditus’ masculinity; she defines him through negation. Thus Hermaphroditus’ change is represented as a problem of male identity (Jones and Stallybrass 1991: 96-7).

If woman is lack, and man is the one, then their unity will result in the woman vanishing altogether, or in the woman becoming a man. The Ledom are a version of men, but not a version of women. According to Moira Gatens:

implied neutrality is not neutrality at all but a “masculinisation” or “normalisation” (in a society where men are seen as the norm, the standard) of women - a making of “woman” into “man” (Gatens [1983] 1996: 17).

But if Hermaphroditus is only another kind of man why has ‘he’ been so consistently obliterated, renamed, ignored or punished under the law? Why is the human bisexual visitor to a world of hermaphrodites so horrified?

In Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) the visitor to the hermaphrodite world is Genly Ai, an envoy from the Ekumen, a vast intergalactic association of planets and cultures. Genly Ai is sent to the planet Winter to contact the native inhabitants and see if they are ready to join this intergalactic association. The planet Winter, or Gethen as it is called by its inhabitants, is unlike any known world because its inhabitants are neither male nor female but neuter except for a short period of time when they go into heat or ‘kemmer’ and become either male or female. The story centres around Genly Ai’s interactions with a Gethenian, Estraven.

The edition of *The Left Hand of Darkness* which I own has the words, “A Classic of Science Fiction” across its cover under the title. On the back cover the blurb begins, “This outstanding classic of science fiction, which won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards when first published”. The book has been re-printed virtually every year since its first publication in 1969 and unlike the majority of
the texts I have been discussing, has a solid place within most canons of science fiction. *Left Hand of Darkness* is also one of the most written about texts in science fiction scholarship.

I have no memory of my first reading of *The Left Hand of Darkness* but when I re-read it for this chapter, the use of the male pronoun seemed in the opening pages to smooth over the difference, the hermaphroditism of the inhabitants of Winter, because it delays the revelation of difference. As the novel opens you are surrounded by men; it is only gradually that ‘kemmer’ is introduced and you learn the extent of the difference between the Gethenians and humans.

In Chapter 7 “The Question of Sex: from field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, Investigator, of the first Ekumenical landing party on Gethen/Winter, Cycle 93 E. Y. 1448,” Oppong, a “woman of peaceful Chiffewar”, observes that

...you cannot think of Gethenians as “it”. They are not neutrals. They are potentials, or integrals. Lacking the Karhidish “human pronoun” used for persons in somer, I must say “he”, for the same reason as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 85).

Here the female observer of the strange planet of Winter has internalised Thomas Laqueur’s observation that “*man* is the measure of all things” (Laqueur 1990: 62).

The text is replete with the envoy, Genly Ai’s binary thinking, his attempts to make the Gethenians male or female:

I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 18).

Gethen is a planet of Crime’s Offspring and to render its people intelligible, Genly turns them into a planet of men. But he is never comfortable with this move and it keeps sliding out of his grasp, because the Gethenians are not either male or female and they will not stay fixed as Genly would have them. It also forces him to think about his assumptions about male and female. Women are
the Other that shadow the text. Early on Genly speaks of men and women as though they are separate species. He writes of the Gethenians:

[they lacked, it seemed, the capacity to mobilize. They behaved like animals, in that respect, or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants. At any rate they never yet had done so (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 47).

This statement is at once a nice gesture in the direction of a branch of the battle of the sexes texts - only with an inversion so that ants are aligned with men not women - and also an example of Genly’s unease with women. Genly’s world is entirely sexed, so that when he watches Estraven making “food-ration calculations” he can only view them as “house-wifely or scientific” (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 204). Estraven asks Genly if women are “like a different species?”

“No. Yes. No, of course not, not really. But the difference is very important. I supposed the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one’s life, is whether one’s born male or female. In most societies it determines one’s expectations, activities, outlooks, ethics, manners - almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food. Women...Women tend to eat less...It’s extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing....”

“Equality is not the general rule, then? Are they mentally inferior?”

“I don’t know. They don’t often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers. But it isn’t that they’re stupid. Physically they’re less muscular, but a little more durable than men. Psychologically.

...“I can’t tell you what women are like. I never thought about it much in the abstract, you know. In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow....” (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 200).

The “heaviest single factor in one’s life, is whether one’s born male or female.” Yet Genly is able to find more ground between himself and the Gethenians than with women because they are male sometimes and he can extend that further to give them humanity. Genly’s words echo those of the man landing on Whiteaway in “When It Changed” - “Where are all the people?” People means men, Genly has accepted the Gethenians, they are men. At least the Gethenians he respects are men. He refers to the “voluble” Gethenian with whom he stays in Ehrenrang as his “landlady” (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 46). And he describes the unreliable and duplicitous King Argaven as laughing “shrilly like an angry woman” (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 33).
(iv) Pronouns are important

...a nice face, neither boyish nor too beautiful; and oh, it was not Laura; it's just that she had Laura's hair.
She.
...
"Y-y-you kept saying he!" cried Charlie stupidly.
"About Soutin? Yes, of course - what else?"
And it came to Charlie, yes of course - what else! For Philos had told his story in the Ledom tongue, and he had always used the Ledom pronoun which is not masculine nor feminine but which also is not "it"; it was he, Charlie, himself, who had translated it "he."

(Sturgeon 1960: 147)

Throughout Venus Plus X (1960), the Ledom have seemed just like men, partly because of this use of the masculine pronoun. This pronoun is the choice of Charlie, is his translation, and it is he who, discovering that the Ledom are not hermaphrodite as the result of a "natural" mutation, calls them all queer. Possessors of an unnatural alteration of their real selves they become homosexual and deviant but still male.

In the majority of the texts I have discussed in this chapter there is an unthinking use of 'man' for humanity and the pronoun 'he' as though it were generic. In Mack Reynold's Amazon Planet (1966) when the women rulers, the Hippolyte and the Myrine, are explaining the workings of Amazonia, they refer to the "human race" rather than "mankind". Hippolyte says:

"The smallest unit of a life form is that unit which can reproduce itself. In the case of the human race, a woman and a man..." (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 182).

and the Myrine chimes in for Ronny's benefit, "Or as Citizen Bronston would undoubtedly put it, a man and a woman" (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 182-3). Earlier in the text when Guy/Ronny is having the system of payment explained to him "she" is used as a generic. "Surely nothing is more just than to realize that each person's time is as valuable to her, as any other person's" (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 99). This was the only example of the female pronoun being used as the generic and it was during the part of the text when the Amazonians are still trying to convince Guy/Ronny that their world is a ruthless matriarchy. The page before the same character uses the male pronoun, "For every hour he puts in as a student, he accrues one hour" (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 98). In the last three
chapters when Ronny is having Amazonia explained to him the male pronoun and man as universal returns: “A highly trained man’s time can be worth several times as many hours as an unskilled man” (Reynolds [1966] 1975: 185). The Disappearance (1951) only uses ‘he’ as a generic pronoun and ‘mankind’ for humanity.

The question of pronouns is one that has been raised frequently about The Left Hand of Darkness. In his review for Fantasy and Science Fiction Alexei Panshin wrote:

her hermaphrodites, seen only in public function, eventually seem purely male, partly because she chooses always to call them “he” (Panshin 1969: 51).

Le Guin responded to this charge in her 1976 article “Is Gender Necessary?”:

But the central failure in this area comes up in the frequent criticism I receive, that the Gethenians seem like men, instead of menwomen.

This rises in part from the choice of pronoun. I call Gethenians “he” because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for “he/she.”

“He” is the generic pronoun, damn it, in English. (I envy the Japanese, who, I am told, do have a he/she pronoun.) But I do not consider this really very important.

The pronouns wouldn’t matter at all if I had been cleverer at showing the “female” component of the Gethenian characters in action (Le Guin 1989: 145).

In 1988 Le Guin responded to her own article. She writes that her

“utter refusal” of 1968 restated in 1976 collapsed utterly within a couple years more. I still dislike invented pronouns, but now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse; and which was an invention of male grammarians, for until the sixteenth century the English generic singular pronoun was they/them/their, as it still is in English and American colloquial speech. It should be restored to the written language and let the pedants and pundits squeak and gibber in the streets (Le Guin 1989: 145).

Le Guin also writes in response to her earlier comments that if she had “realized how the pronouns I used shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking, I might have been ‘cleverer’” (Le Guin 1989: 145).

The use of the male pronoun as the neuter pronoun in Left Hand of Darkness is closely connected to the fact that the most frequent first person narrator is Genly Ai, the envoy to the planet Winter from the Ekumen. Genly is a man, the masculine pronoun is his. His use of it keeps the nature of the Gethenians at arm’s length. The use of ‘he’ keeps this world of Others in the realm of the Same.
So has Genly succeeded in making the world of Winter male, has his male pronoun, his 'he' erased the hermaphrodite neuter existence of the majority of a Gethenian's life? Or does the hermaphrodite neuter existence erase women? There is one near-erasure in the text - homosexuality. The heterosexual couple is at the heart of Winter. An Ekumen observer writes that when they go into kemmer:

either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 82).

The Ekumen observer makes a parenthetical note, "? without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare so as to be ignored" (Le Guin [1969] 1991: 82). But ignored by whom? The Gethenians or the Ekumen Investigators? In the Ekumen's account the vowing of kemmering is an equivalent to monogamous marriage and is perhaps Leonora's "units of lovers" from Proud Man. Man during kemmer plus women during kemmer equals the basic unit of society. But there is nothing to say that each partner in the kemmering will remain that sex every time they go into kemmer.

In this and the previous chapter I have looked closely at a wide variety of battle of the sexes texts, all of which raise issues about constructions of not only masculinity and femininity but of sexed bodies, men, women and otherwise. In the next chapter I examine how the discourse of the battle of the sexes operates in debates about the role of women in science fiction. These debates took place in the letter columns of the professional science fiction magazines, the same magazines in which many of the battle of the sexes stories were first published.
The February 1959 cover of *Future* by Emsh.